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Salvador Said to Break Gunship Pact

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SAN SALVADOR, Jan. 10 — The Salvadoran Air Force is said to have used a second American-supplied aircraft as a gunship this week, apparently undercutting an understanding between the Reagan Administration and Congress.

The report came from witnesses to a recent battle and a source in El Salvador with knowledge of the plane's use.

American Embassy officials told reporters on Tuesday that one C-47 aircraft had been converted into a gunship and sent to El Salvador, equipped with special sights, night vision equipment and three specially mounted .50-caliber machine guns capable of firing over 1,500 rounds per minute.

The officials did not tell reporters that an additional C-47 was delivered. Today, the United States Embassy spokesman, Donald Hamilton, said the second plane was fully equipped to serve as a gunship, but under an agreement with Congress was not yet mounted with machine guns.

Second Plane Believed Used

The agreement between the Administration and Congress stipulated that the second aircraft could be used in combat only after American officials had evaluated the performance and use of the first gunship, according to an aide of Representative Michael D. Barnes, head of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs.

But apparently in violation of that understanding the Salvadoran Air Force is believed to have equipped the second aircraft with a rapid-fire gun of unknown specification and used it as a gunship alongside the first aircraft in a battle earlier this week, according to the source with knowledge of the plane's use.

It is not known if American officials were aware that the Salvadorans intended to use the plane in combat, but it appears there was little supervision over how it would be employed.

The United States Ambassador to El Salvador, Thomas R. Pickering, refused to comment on the matter today. Other American officials also refused to comment on whether the two

American-provided planes had been involved in combat.

"The embassy is aware of reports that more than one plane may have been used and is looking into the matter," Mr. Hamilton said.

'Cause for Serious Concern'

Representative Barnes said unauthorized use of the second plane in combat would be cause for serious concern.

"In November I was given personal assurances by the Department of State that this would not occur," Mr. Barnes said in a statement released by an aide in a telephone interview. "If the situation is as it appears, it is a direct violation of the personal assurances I was given two months ago."

An aide to Representative George Miller, Democrat of California, echoed the criticism. "It would appear to be a serious violation of the understanding between the Administration and members of Congress," the aide said.

The terms under which the planes were to be used were set out in a letter from senior members of Congress to Ambassador Pickering on Sept. 20. The letter was signed by Edward Boland, then head of the House Intelligence Committee, Dante B. Fascell, head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Mr. Barnes, according to an aide to Mr. Barnes.

92 Members Sign Letter

According to two Congressional sources, the letter to the Ambassador said, "We understand you will not authorize release of the second rebuilt C-47 to El Salvador unless you are satisfied that the system is working well, with due attention to human rights concerns."

The aide to Representative Miller said 92 members of Congress had signed a letter to Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger in September expressing concern over the deployment of gunships to El Salvador.

The aide said Defense Department and State Department officials had given assurances that the second gunship would be sent into combat only after American officials had studied how the first gunship had performed.

The American-provided planes were used to attack leftist guerrillas for the

first time, apparently with some success, in a heavy 18-hour battle in San Vicente Province two days ago, according to several reporters who watched the fighting. Having been told by American officials that only one gunship was in the country, the reporters were surprised to see two gunships spraying the guerrillas with long bursts of unbroken machine-gun fire.

15 Rebels Found Dead

Army spokesmen say the bodies of 15 rebels were found when the battle ended, an unusually high number in a war in which the rebels almost always carry away all of their dead. The army reportedly lost at least 15 dead and over 40 wounded and there are indications that the figures could go higher.

The Salvadoran Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Adolfo Blandón, said in an interview today that he personally directed the battle from a specially equipped American-provided communication helicopter that hovered above the battle.

"It's a good plane," General Blandón said of the C-47 gunship. "But we need more and better ones."

The Salvadoran commander said he would ask the United States this year to provide a total of six gunships and 10 Hughes 500 helicopters equipped with rapid-fire "miniguns" of a type used in Vietnam. If delivered, such weapons would radically increase the fire-power available to the Salvadoran military.

Warning by Rights Groups

General Blandón said the helicopters and gunships would be used in tandem to clear guerrilla forces from landing zones and repel large rebel attacks.

Human rights organizations have frequently warned, however, that such high-powered weaponry could cause heavy civilian casualties in the populated areas where many battles are fought in El Salvador. The aide to Representative Miller said the Administration had promised that gunships would not be used near villages.

The Salvadoran Air Force has bombed towns and killed civilians on at least three occasions, moving President José Napoleón Duarte to issue new rules last year limiting aerial bombardment and strafing.